

The New York Times

Jeb Bush, 20 Years After Conversion, Is Guided by His Catholic Faith

By **Michael Paulson**

March 17, 2015

CORAL GABLES, Fla. — He arrived a few minutes early — no entourage, just his wife and daughter — and, sweating through a polo shirt in the hot morning sun, settled quietly into the 14th row at the Church of the Little Flower.

A bit of a murmur, and the occasional “Morning, Governor,” passed through the Spanish Renaissance-style church, with its manicured grounds and towering palms, as worshipers recognized their most famous neighbor, Jeb Bush. He held hands with the other worshipers during the Lord’s Prayer, sang along to “I Am the Bread of Life” and knelt after receiving communion.

“It gives me a serenity, and allows me to think clearer,” Mr. Bush said as he exited the tile-roof church here on a recent Sunday, exchanging greetings and, with the ease of a longtime politician, acquiescing to the occasional photo. “It’s made me a better person.”

Twenty years after Mr. Bush converted to Catholicism, the religion of his wife, following a difficult and unsuccessful political campaign that had put a strain on his marriage, his faith has become a central element of the way he shapes his life and frames his views on public policy. And now, as he explores a bid for the presidency, his religion has become a focal point of early appeals to evangelical activists, who are particularly important in a Republican primary that is often dominated by religious voters.

Many of his priorities during his two terms as governor of Florida aligned with those of the Catholic Church — including his extraordinary, and unsuccessful, effort to force a hospital to keep Terri Schiavo on life support, as well as less well-

known, and also unsuccessful, efforts to appoint a guardian for the fetus of a developmentally disabled rape victim and to prevent a 13-year-old girl from having an abortion. He even, during his first year in office in 1999, signed a law creating a “Choose Life” license plate.



Jeb Bush, then the governor of Florida, praying before a cabinet meeting in 2000 in Tallahassee. “It gives me a serenity, and allows me to think clearer,” he said of his religion.

Stan Honda/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

He differed from his church, significantly and openly, over capital punishment; the state executed 21 prisoners on his watch, the most under any Florida governor since the death penalty was reinstated in 1976. But he has won praise from Catholic officials for his welcoming tone toward immigrants and his relatively centrist positions on education — two issues in which he is at odds with the right wing of his party.

“As a public leader, one’s faith should guide you,” Mr. Bush said in Italy in 2009, explaining his attitude about the relationship between religion and politics at a conference associated with Communion and Liberation, a conservative Catholic lay movement.

“In the United States, many people think you need to keep your faith, put it in a security box, if you’re an elected official — put it in a safety deposit box until you finish your service as a public servant and then you can go get it back,” he added. “I never felt that was appropriate.”

Like his brother George W. Bush, who established the White House office on faith-based initiatives, Jeb Bush was a champion of religion-based social services. As governor, he established what he said was the nation’s first faith-based prison, encouraging religious activity — of any faith tradition — in an effort to reduce criminal behavior. And he has said his religious beliefs helped inform his concern about child welfare and other issues.

“You hear people say, ‘I don’t want to impose my faith,’ ” Mr. Bush told the newspaper The Florida Catholic days after leaving office in 2007. “Well, it’s not an imposition of faith. It’s who you are.”

The son and brother of Protestant presidents, Mr. Bush, if elected, would be the nation’s second Catholic president. Sometimes, he carries a rosary in his pocket and fingers its beads at moments of crisis. He is a member of the Knights of Columbus and has retweeted Pope Francis. He was part of the American delegation to the installation of Pope Benedict XVI in 2005, and during his travels in the United States he sometimes attends Mass in local churches.

Mr. Bush is not the first Catholic in his family. His great-grandfather George Herbert Walker was a Jesuit-educated Roman Catholic who married a Presbyterian.

Jeb Bush, who was baptized in the Episcopal Church, began his journey to Catholicism inadvertently when, as a high school exchange student in Mexico, he met and fell in love with Columba Garnica Gallo. She is a committed Catholic, despite having felt poorly treated by other Catholics when her parents divorced. When the Bushes married, in 1974 (he was 21, and she was 20), it was at the Catholic student center at the University of Texas.

"Jeb did not express any particular interest in converting at the time, but he was aware of her responsibility to share her faith with her children," said the Rev. Charles J. Brunick, a Paulist priest who officiated at the couple's wedding.

Jeb and Columba Bush raised their three children as Catholics, and Mr. Bush went to Mass with his family. "It played an important part in our lives," he said by email.

D. Michael McCarron, who at the time was the executive director of the Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops, recalled seeing Mr. Bush with his wife during a Mass in Tallahassee in the late 1980s, when Mr. Bush was Florida's secretary of commerce. "At the time he was not a Catholic, and I was struck by the fact that he would not take communion, which is appropriate, and I just observed him kneeling and praying," Mr. McCarron said.

In 1994, Mr. Bush ran unsuccessfully for governor, employing language that some viewed as mean-spirited, in part because of a comment suggesting that he did not see a role for government in helping African-Americans, and in part because of an ad he ran criticizing the incumbent governor for what he said was slow action on executing the murderer of a 10-year-old.

After his defeat, he acknowledged that his marriage was experiencing some stress and said he was going to take some time to regroup. During that period, he began the formal process of becoming a Catholic, taking classes at Epiphany Parish in South Miami.

"His knowledge of the Bible was better than mine, and I was a cradle Catholic," said Dolores D. Holler, who at the time was an active Epiphany parishioner and was assigned to help Mr. Bush as a sponsor during the conversion process. "On Sunday afternoons he rode a bike to church to go to Mass, and when it got really hot, he'd say, 'Dee, could you take me home?' and I'd say, 'Yeah, throw the bike in the trunk.' "

Mr. Bush was officially received into the Catholic Church at the Easter vigil of 1995, making a profession of faith and being anointed with oil before receiving communion for the first time as a Catholic.

“I had decided to convert after my campaign for governor, win or lose,” he wrote in a 2003 email to a second grader in Texas who was working on a school project about famous American Catholics. “My wife is Catholic and we always went to Mass, so she was my principal motivation.”

He has also suggested that concerns about the Episcopal Church, which has moved steadily to the left on social issues and liturgical matters, played a role in his decision.

“I love the sacraments of the Catholic Church, the timeless nature of the message of the Catholic Church, the fact that the Catholic Church believes in, and acts on, absolute truth as its foundational principle and doesn’t move with the tides of modern times, as my former religion did,” he said in the speech in Italy in 2009. (Asked by email recently what his concerns were, he said only: “I loved the absolute nature of the Catholic Church. It resonated with me.”)



Pope Benedict XVI greeting Mr. Bush in 2005 in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican. Mr. Bush converted to Catholicism 20 years ago. L'Osservatore Romano, via Associated Press

Mr. Bush's second campaign for governor, in 1998, was characterized by modulated language; he trumpeted a newfound compassion, and won.

"His campaign was still very conservative, but much more moderate in tone — clearly, he had a different perspective," said Matthew T. Corrigan, a political scientist at the University of North Florida and the author of a biography of Mr. Bush. "If you look at his policy positions, you can see a strong connection to his new faith."

As governor, Mr. Bush turned to Catholic ritual at crucial moments. In 2004, he attended Mass in Pensacola after the area was hit by Hurricane Ivan. In Tallahassee, he would at times join a group of state employees who prayed the

rosary on Mondays in a Capitol chapel, and he went to Mass at Blessed Sacrament, a parish near the Governor's Mansion.

"Initially, we were surprised that he was Catholic," said the Rev. John V. O'Sullivan, who was the pastor of Blessed Sacrament during Mr. Bush's tenure as governor. "There was no standing on ceremony — he was very open and friendly. And he seems to be devout."

The bishops who led Florida's seven Catholic dioceses met annually with Mr. Bush, often opening their gatherings with prayer. Each year, the bishops would try to convince Mr. Bush that the death penalty should be ended in Florida, and each year they failed.

"Anybody could see he was a devout Catholic — he was new to the Catholic faith and took his faith seriously," said Bishop John H. Ricard, who oversaw the Pensacola-Tallahassee Diocese when Mr. Bush was governor. "He approached the whole thing, especially the death penalty, with seriousness and respect, but we just agreed we would disagree. We were firm in our position, but I think he was sincere about his."

Dolores D. Holler was assigned to help Mr. Bush as a sponsor during his conversion to Catholicism. Ty Wright for The New York Times

At one point, the bishops urged Mr. Bush to reject a plan to install wire mesh screening around the cells of death row inmates to prevent them from throwing objects; the bishops thought the measure was cruel. The governor rejected their assessment.

“I appreciate the Catholic Conference’s sincere commitment to advancing public policy that complies with the teachings of our Lord,” the governor wrote in an email to Bishop Robert N. Lynch of St. Petersburg. “I hope you know that I try to do the same. When we seldom disagree, it makes me very, very uncomfortable. Having said that, I will continue to do what I think is right.”

Those disputes notwithstanding, Mr. Bush has received praise from Catholic leaders. Last year, he visited New York to help raise money for Catholic schools, attended Mass at St. Patrick’s Cathedral and won plaudits from Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan, who interviewed Mr. Bush on his radio program and then talked about him on “Face the Nation” on CBS.

“I like Jeb Bush a lot,” Cardinal Dolan said in the television appearance. “I especially appreciate the priority he gives to education and immigration.”

Mr. Bush is now courting Protestant leaders as well, presenting himself as a man of faith who understands the concerns of religious voters. Last spring, he hosted Russell Moore, a prominent Southern Baptist, in Coral Gables, welcoming him to his office, having lunch with him, giving him a tour and even driving him to the airport.

“He talked quite openly about his own faith journey, and we talked about C. S. Lewis, whose writings are significant in both of our lives,” Mr. Moore said.

“Some candidates feel that they have to talk about this, so they prep up to do so, and then do so in an inauthentic and pandering sort of way,” he added. “He seemed very confident in where he stands personally in terms of his faith, and it was a very easy conversation for him.”

Correction: March 17, 2015

An earlier version of this article mischaracterized the religious journey of former President George H.W. Bush. He was raised in the Episcopal Church, and his wife, Barbara, was raised in the Presbyterian Church; they were married in the Presbyterian Church, but have attended Episcopal churches for decades. Mr. Bush did not join the Episcopal Church of his wife.

Steve Eder and Kitty Bennett contributed research.

A version of this article appears in print on March 18, 2015, on Page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: Bush Makes Catholic Faith a Touchstone as He Looks to 2016

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